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SUBJECT: WESTERN SAHARA/REFUGEES MOROCCO DROPS UNHCR CBM
SEMINAR

Classified By: Classified by Charge d'Affairs Robert P. Jackson for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Morocco has pulled out of next week's planned UNHCR Confidence-Building seminar. Charge, along with some dozen other COM's, was called in November 9 by MFA Secretary-General Hilale, who said Morocco's decision was

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based on its belief the seminar, and CBM's in general had become politicized by the POLISARIO. Morocco still supports and wants to continue and expand family exchanges. and telephone calls, UNHCR is disappointed by the last-minute Moroccan decision, but not very surprised, as Morocco had so far declined to submit its participant list. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) Foreign Ministry chief diplomat Secretary-General Omar Hilale called in a baker's dozen Chiefs of Mission to convey Morocco's decision to pull out of the UNHCR-organized Confidence Building seminar planned for next week (Nov 12-14) in Madeira, Portugal. Charge attended along with Ambassadors or deputies from the P-5 countries, significant donors, and Portugal, both as EU president and as the host of the planned conference. Morocco had informed HCR last week in Geneva.

¶3. (C) Hilale said the GOM decision was based on POLISARIO politicizing the Seminar. It had vetoed Moroccan participants. He said that POLISARIO had been aggressive, insulting impertinent and irresponsible toward Morocco, also criticizing their attitude in the Manhasset negotiations.

¶4. (C) Hilale underscored Morocco's continuing support for the humanitarian CBM's, particularly the exchange visits and telephone calls, which he wanted to continue, and at the end he thanked donors for contributing. He charged that POLISARIO had politicized them. He noted the great demand for the visits; 25,000 Sahrawis had signed up, and the current rate of 20 people on biweekly flights will not make much dent in this. UNHCR has also politicized the process, accepting that the POLISARIO would determine who could go, allowing the POLISARIO to keep some family members at home as "hostages." He also asserted that non-POLISARIO tribes and camps had not been permitted to participate. The systematic politicizing of the CBM's could even affect the upcoming

negotiations. He claimed that the POLISARIO wanted CBM's as part of the political negotiations, but Morocco prefers CBM's to remain in the humanitarian realm, with the talks focused on the political solution.

¶5. (C) In answer to a question about potential land routes for the refugee exchanges, Hilale said Morocco had offered up two routes but that Algeria had not agreed, citing mine danger, and counter-proposed a route which ran through "liberated" territory. This convoluted route was not acceptable to the GOM.

¶6. (C) UNHCR Laayoune confirmed that the High Commissioner himself had received a Moroccan delegation bearing the cancellation. He said they had never received any nominees from Morocco, although there was some reports that the POLISARIO had commented on a list of Saharan names UNHCR had not obtained. Neither UNHCR nor embassy has been able to find this reference. UNHCR had previously indicated to us that they believed the GOM claim that the POLISARIO was holding hostages, was a "canard," maintaining that whole families have sometimes visited and HCR itself limited the size of some family contingents in order to spread the benefits of the program more widely. We had earlier heard from them that High Representative Gutierrez had personally gone to bat with his former colleagues in Lisbon to gain their sponsorship of the meeting.

¶7. (C) Comment: Sahrawi families can be large, so intended or not it would be likely that some relatives would not have been able to travel under any circumstances. This is the first time we have heard of the exclusion of non-POLISARIO tribes and we have never previously heard of the existence of non-POLISARIO camps. The seminar was to treat the potentially sensitive subject of the Sahrawi Hassaniyah dialect of Arabic--Spoken in Southern Morocco, Mauritania, and western Algeria as well as Western Sahara. This last

minute move when the GOM had accepted the conference in principle, also could be a pre-emptive strike by the GOM at van Walsum's efforts to put expanded, political CBM's on the agenda for the next round of talks. Both parties had balked at this last time prompting the UN to make a more neutral presentation on governance. It could also feeding into Morocco's strategy of postponing the next session of talks until after the December POLISARIO meeting.

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Jackson